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REPORT

Negotiations with the European Union - Polish opinions

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Integration with the European Union is the greatest challenge currently faced by Poland and the Polish people. The process which was initiated in the early 1990s will change its character and pace together with the beginning of the talks. It will become the source of many challenges and dilemmas, questions and problems. During that period, romantic visions will be confronted with the play of interests, and expectations with the outcome of the talks. Thus, the attitude held by some of the people towards the integration may change.

The following report on the opinions held by the public on the eve of the launching of the negotiations with the European Union, has been prepared by the Public Affairs Institute as part of the research and analysis programme on the consequences of the integration. The survey commissioned by the Public Affairs Institute was carried out on a representative sample of 1066 members of adult Poles by the opinion research centre Pracownia Badań Społecznych from Sopot on 14-15 February 1998.

Main results

1. Poles approve of their country's accession to the European Union, although they are increasingly sceptical: there is a growing belief about an inequality in relations between Poland and the European Union.
2. The people are to a large extent realistic as regards the time required for Poland to become a fully fledged member of the Union: 57% of respondents hold the opinion that this is going to take place by the year 2003.
3. There has been a clear delineation of the public's attitudes towards the integration process: both the group of supporters as well as a much less numerous group of opponents of the process have been consolidated. At the same time, Poles have been finding it easier to formulate opinions about the integration process.
4. Poles may be divided into two groups of a very similar size: one of the groups believes that Poland is not well prepared for the talks with the European Union (44%), while the Polish government is submissive to the Union (41%), whereas the second group has confidence in the attitude of the government (38%) and in Poland's readiness for the talks (42%).
5. Most Poles hold the opinion that the integration process will have little or none impact on their lives. Thus, the integration process is not approached from the perspective of everyday life. It appears as a remote development occurring beyond the citizens.

6. Those who are convinced that the integration will effect their lives are mainly farmers on the one hand, and respondents holding managerial positions on the other. Whereas the process provokes fears among the former group, members of the latter group vest hopes in the integration.
7. Educated people, young people, as well as unemployed, have high expectations related to the integration process, hoping to solve their problems and to fulfil their aspirations.
8. Only one in four farmers approves of Poland's accession to the European Union.

1. Approval for integration.

European integration is now the main goal of Poland's foreign policy, along with the achievement of NATO membership. The public's approval for the integration processes is necessary in order to enable an efficient implementation of that goal. The extent of that support will be important for Polish negotiators during the talks with Brussels representatives, and will be decisive if Poland's accession to the Union were preceded by a nation-wide referendum.

One of the indicators of the social approval for the integration process is the way in which respondents would vote in the referendum on Poland's accession to the European Union.

Table 1.

If a referendum were held in Poland on the accession to the European Union, would you vote:	opinion poll carried out by the opinion research centre CBOS in April 1997 ¹	survey by the Public Affairs Institute (ISP) carried out in February 1998
in favour of the accession	72	64
against the accession	11	9
will not vote in the referendum	-	13
difficult to say	18	14

Most of the people are in favour of Poland's accession to the European Union, although some of them have no interest in the issue and are not going to take part in a possible referendum.

The results of both surveys cannot be fully compared because the choice of possible answers suggested in the ISP survey was broader: the respondents could choose between voting for or against, but they could also declare a lack of interest in voting at all. It appears necessary to take the latter option into account due to a repeated low turnout in the parliamentary elections as well as in the property enfranchisement and constitutional referenda. Therefore, the latest result provides a better illustration of the possible attitudes held by the respondents towards integration.

Due to a limited extent in which the results of the two surveys may be compared, the figures presented in Table 2 cannot be interpreted as a clear decline in support for integration.

¹ The report refers to the results of the CBOS poll conducted on a 1,000 quota sample in April 1997.

Approval in the range of 64% proves that the integration process continues to enjoy quite a high support.

Those respondents who definitely approve of Poland's accession to the Union, support a quick pace of the integration process. Therefore, the replies to the question about a desirable moment for Poland's accession to the Union provide an equally good reflection of the true attitudes towards the entire process.

Table 2.

When, in your opinion, would it be best for Poland to become a fully fledged member of the European Union?	CBOS 1996 ²	ISP February 1998
by the year 2000	already now - 35	40
in five years	37	25
in ten years	8	10
later than that	3	4
never	3	6
difficult to say	14	16

A majority of Poles (65%) would like Poland to join the European Union *not later than in five years*, i.e., by the years 2003. Two years ago, the completion of integration within five years was supported by 72% of respondents. This may prove a slight decline in support for the entire integration process, and a gradual delineation of two groups of opinions: one clearly approving of the integration process and wishing the process to take place as soon as possible (an increase from 35% up to 40%), and the group holding a negative attitude (in ten years or never: an increase from 14% up to 20%).

Poles are realistic in their assessments concerning the date of Poland's accession to the Union: 57% of respondents believe that the process will take place within five years.

² The survey was conducted on a nation-wide representative sample of 1,154 adult Poles in May 1996.

Table 3.

When, in your opinion, Poland will really become a fully fledged member of the European Union?	CBOS 1996		ISP February 1998	
by the year 2000	now - 6	55	17	57
in five years	49		40	
in ten years	13		18	
later than that	5		5	
never	3		3	
difficult to say	24		18	

At the same time, two groups have grown in numbers: one comprised of optimists who expect Poland to become a member of the Union by the year 2000, and the other one consisting of pessimists who hold the opinion that Poland will become a member of the Union in ten years. In addition to that, an increasing number of Poles are able to define the integration in terms of time.

The growth in the number of replies “by the year 2000” may be explained with the fact that the survey was conducted within a very short time from the launching of the negotiations. This means that a vast part of the people associate the beginning of the talks with prospects for soon integration. Those people may feel disappointed if the negotiations are prolonged.

Bearing in mind that both the Polish chief negotiator as well as representatives of the European Union consider the five-year perspective the most likely one, one may say that the Polish public share their opinion concerning the length of time required for Poland to be able to become a fully fledged member of the European Union. Nevertheless, there is a lot of room for an information campaign addressed to the group expecting the talks to produce quick results, in order to prevent a growing impatience and frustration among the most ardent supporters of the process.

The greatest support for Poland’s integration with the Union was expressed by the unemployed, respondents aged between 18 and 24, college or university graduates, and public sector workers. Only 25% of farmers approve of the accession to the European Communities.

2. Evaluation of relations with the EU and the consequences of integration.

The continuous high approval for the unification processes is accompanied by a growing scepticism in the evaluation of the relations between Poland and the European Union to date. In this case as well, a clear delineation has been observed in the opinions expressed by

respondents, with a clear decline in the number of respondents who had no opinion on the subject.

Table 4.

How do you evaluate the relations between Poland and the European Union to date? Which side derives greater benefits?	CBOS 1996	ISP February 1998
the European Union countries	31	38
Poland	9	10
equally: Poland and the European Union	25	27
none	7	10
difficult to say	29	15

The largest group of respondents believe that the mutual relations bring more benefits for the European Union than for Poland. The number of respondents holding that opinion has clearly increased during the past two years.

The sceptical or cautious evaluation of Poland's position with regard to the European Union is even more manifest in the answers about the projected status of Poland after its accession to the Union: a majority of respondents believe that Poland will become a second class member.

Table 5.

Following the accession to the European Union, Poland will become:	ISP February 1998
A really equal member of the organisation, the same as other member states	29
a second-class, weaker member, with a worse position	55
difficult to say	16

The projection concerning Poland's worse position after the accession to the Union does not mean a lack of approval for the integration. Nearly a half of those who are going to vote in favour of Poland's accession to the Union in a possible referendum, at the same time hold the opinion that Poland will become a second class member. However, among the respondents declaring their plans to vote against Poland's membership in the European Union, 92% believe that Poland will be a second class member. In the future, a growing conviction about Poland's handicap in comparison to other member states and the country's worse position in the negotiations, may lead to a fall in approval for the integration process.

As a rule, those who believe that Poland will become an equal member of the Union, would like the country to join the organisation as soon as possible.

Table 6.

After Poland's accession to the European Union the country will become:	a really equal member of the organisation, just like other EU countries	a second class member, weaker, with a worse position	difficult to say
total	29	55	16
will vote in favour of the accession	39	49	12
will vote against	4	92	4
won't vote in the referendum	11	67	48

Why does a large part of the public approve of the integration process despite the conviction that Poland will have a low, weaker position? When thinking of Poland's future, a number of people were guided rather by their opinions concerning Poland's current position in Europe, and not by an assessment of the effects of the integration process. Those people were referring to Poland's civilisation and economic gap which cannot be made up for quickly, even after the accession to the Union, and they did not refer to the potential results of the negotiations. A different interpretation is also possible: for half of the people the integration process will be advantageous enough to make to support it even if Poland is going to be a weaker, worse member of the European Community.

According to some of the respondents, Poland's future position will be determined by the relative weakness of its economy in the competition with more advanced economies of the EU countries. Therefore, a large group of people replied that it is necessary to ensure a transition period for Polish companies. In addition to that, very strong fears were observed among the people that many companies may go bankrupt in the future. Nonetheless, overall, half of respondents (51%) believe that Polish companies will be able to meet the challenges related to integration, provided that appropriate conditions are secured.

Table 7.

In your opinion, will most Polish companies manage to compete in the free European market or not?	ISP February 1998
Yes, they will because Polish companies are sufficiently competitive	12
Yes, they will if they are provided a sufficiently long protection period	39
No, they will not, many of them will go out of business	38
difficult to say	11

There is a strong connection between Poland's projected position after the accession to the Union, and the evaluation of competitiveness of the Polish economy. The largest group of respondents believe that Poland will be a second-class member because Polish companies are too weak. On the other hand, optimists expect that Poland will be an equal member because the economy will manage under the condition that appropriate protection periods are ensured.

The belief in the sufficient competitiveness of Polish companies is more often held by college or university graduates, high income earners, respondents living in large cities, respondents holding managerial positions, as well as supporters of the Freedom Union (UW) and (less frequently) of Solidarity Elections Action (AWS). The supporters of protection periods for Polish companies can be found most commonly among: younger respondents, public sector workers, and respondents with average incomes. Just like in the first case, they most often support the current government coalition, although the distribution of political sympathies is surprisingly even among this group. Fears that most Polish companies will not manage to face competition prevail clearly among farmers and unskilled workers, as well as among the supporters of the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP) and the PSL peasant party.

Approval for social and economic decisions is usually pegged to their expected impact on the everyday life of different social groups. Therefore, opinions concerning the effect of particular reforms or decisions on the life of the citizens, and the extent of that impact, are of a key importance.

A majority of respondents (63%) expect no or only small changes to occur in their lives following Poland's accession to the European Union.

Table 8.

Will Poland's accession to the EU influence your life?	ISP February 1998
Yes, it will be a significant influence.	22
Yes, it will, but to a small extent.	35
No, it will not have significant influence.	28
Difficult to say	14

Only less than a quarter of the people believe that European integration will produce a major impact on their lives. Thus, the integration process is not approached from the everyday life perspective. It appears to Poles as some distant issue dealt with beyond them.

It is interesting to note that those who expect the integration to produce a major impact on their lives are mostly members of groups which hold contrary attitudes towards European issues. On the one hand, there are representatives of people holding managerial positions and supporters of the Freedom Union (UW) (27%), and on the other, farmers and farm workers (44%), and supporters of the PSL peasant party (34%). One group vests considerable hopes in the process, while the other has serious fears. A clear trend was observed for younger people and respondents with college or university diplomas to be more often convinced about the great importance of integration.

Among those who believe that integration will have no major effect on their lives, a majority are older people, people with little education, pensioners, but also, which is interesting, people relatively well off in terms of their financial status.

Fears concerning negative consequences of the integration process in everyday life have an impact on attitudes towards the European Union. The people who want to vote against the accession more often tend to believe that Poland's membership in the European Union will influence their lives, whereas the supporters of the process hold the opinion that the influence will not be a major one. Unwillingness to vote in the referendum stems from the belief that integration will change nothing in the life of a given person.

However, on the whole, it is quite difficult to identify a clear correspondence between the opinions concerning the individual consequences of integration with the opinions on other issues connected to the European Union. *The unification processes are very abstract for an average citizen who finds it difficult to imagine their specific consequences.*

3. Expectations towards negotiations between Poland and the European Union.

In view of the upcoming talks with the European Union, the level of information which the public has been provided about the issue seems to be particularly important.

Table 9.

In your opinion, how well are you informed of the talks with the European Union?	ISP February 1998
I feel very well informed	3
I feel well informed	20
I feel poorly informed	46
I feel very poorly informed	27

difficult to say	4
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A great part of the people (73%) feel that they have not been adequately informed about the negotiations. The evaluation of one's own level of information is connected to the attitude towards integration: people poorly informed more often think that we are being taken advantage of by the Union and declare a lack of interest in taking part in an accession referendum. Respondents who feel well informed view the relations between Poland and the Union as equal and are going to vote *en masse* in favour of the accession. Thus good information encourages approval for the European Union and the integration process. Or to put it differently, people who have a positive attitude towards the Union are probably more open to information and look for the information.

Opinions are divided as concerns the level of Poland's readiness for the talks: the group of people who believe that Poland is well prepared for the negotiations (42%) is almost as large as the group holding the opposite opinion (44%).

Table 10.

In your opinion, is Poland well prepared for the talks with the European Union?	ISP February 1998
definitely yes	3
rather yes	39
rather no	33
definitely no	11
difficult to say	14

People who consider themselves poorly informed believe that Poland is unprepared for the talks, while respondents who positively evaluate their level of information consider the country well prepared. Thus, the opinions concerning Poland's readiness for the talks more likely reflect deeper attitudes or illustrate attitudes towards the current government rather than the true level of information.

A majority of supporters of the Freedom Union (UW), as well as of Solidarity Elections Action (AWS) are convinced about Poland's readiness for the talks. The most negative opinions were clearly voiced by supporters of the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP), who are at the same time, along with the supporters of the PSL peasant party, the most sceptical in their attitudes towards the integration process.

College or university graduates tend to be more critical than average as regards Poland's readiness for the talks. In their case, this may be a result of high expectations and requirements formulated towards the persons in charge of the negotiation process.

The belief that Poland is poorly prepared for the talks is strongly connected to the belief that Poland will become a second class member after the accession to the Union. About 35% of the public hold that view and support integration at the same time. That paradox may be explained by the fact that *the key issue for the respondents in the context of preparations for the talks, is the dynamism of the Polish economy*. After all, the survey showed a very strong connection between the opinion on the country's readiness for the talks and the ability of Polish companies to face competition in the European free market.

Confidence in the negotiation process is based to a large extent on the evaluation of the government's attitude towards the negotiating partner. According to a large group of respondents, the current government is too submissive towards the Union, and only few people think that the Polish authorities are firm in defending national interests.

Overall, negative attitudes (41%) are balanced with the positive ones: firm attitude and ability to reconcile interests (38%).

Table 11.

What is your opinion on the present government's attitude towards the European Union:	ISP February 1998
firm in defending Polish interests	10
submissive to the Union's demands	41
able to reconcile Polish and EU interests	28
difficult to say	21

The Polish authorities are accused of servility towards the Union by farmers, workers employed in the trade sector, as well as the supporters of the PSL peasant party, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP). Respondents supporting the SLD are guided rather by a hostility towards the centre right government than towards the European Union. As a rule, among groups holding more optimistic attitudes towards the integration prospects (students, respondents holding managerial positions, white collar workers), respondents more often than others tended to believe in the government's skill in reconciling the interests of Poland and of the European Union. The same opinion was held by a majority of supporters of the Freedom Union (UW).

A close relation was identified between the respondents' attitude towards the government and their opinion about Poland's readiness for the talks. Those who believe that

the country is well prepared for the negotiations, more often tend to consider the government able to reconcile contradicting interests and to be firm in defending national interests. The belief in the government's submissive attitude towards the Union is often coupled by a poor evaluation of Poland's readiness for the talks. These opinions are comprised in a broader outlook: a conviction that the world seeks to take advantage of Poland's weak political and economic position. A belief in the government's submissive attitude and a poor evaluation of the readiness for the talks are elements comprised within that attitude.

However, critical assessments of the government's attitude are moderated by the belief that Poland's position with regard to the Union will be determined mainly by the advancement of Polish reforms, and only to a much lesser extent, by the attitude of the Polish negotiators. The largest group of respondents point to the need for Poland to undertake adjustment efforts on its own, while only 31% support the determinist opinion that "little depends on us."

Table 12.

In your opinion, the terms of Poland's accession to the European Union will mostly depend on:	ISP February 1998
the readiness, skills and firmness of Polish negotiators	20
the advancement of reforms and modernisation in Poland	35
political decisions of the EU member states	31
difficult to say	14

Farmers and farm workers more often tend to believe that the outcome of the negotiations will depend on the EU countries and not on the efforts undertaken by the Polish side. On the other hand, the opinion that reforms are the most important is surprisingly popular among the unemployed.

The political orientation of particular groups of respondents is in quite a clear connection with their opinions concerning the essence of the accession talks. Thus, supporters of the Freedom Union (UW) much more often tended to point to the key importance of Polish reforms, while supporters of the PSL peasant party placed stress on preparing Polish negotiators and on the negotiators' firm attitude. Supporters of Solidarity Elections Action (AWS) tend to believe a little more often than the average that both the firm attitude of negotiators and the advancement of reforms are important. On the other hand, the belief in the importance of political decisions made by the EU countries is usually held by supporters of the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP) and of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD).

This is quite a good reflection of the attitudes held by the political parties towards European integration. The report published by the Public Affairs Institute last autumn concerning the attitude of political parties towards Europe, reads,

“Beneath the uniform support declared for the integration process there is an array of attitudes ranging between two different integration philosophies. According to the first philosophy, reforms in Poland should be accelerated in order to strengthen the country’s position both during the talks as well as after the accession to the European Union. Supporters of that view claim that Poland should be interested in the soonest integration, while the completion of the process depends predominantly on the pace of our internal reforms. This approach may be seen especially in the position held by the Freedom Union (UW). The second integration philosophy, whose essence has been formulated in the programme of the PSL peasant party, stems from the assumption that everything depends on the firm and non-compromising attitude of the negotiators who should try to obtain the most favourable terms for Poland. Both philosophies view the integration process as inevitable, although the conclusions drawn from that belief are entirely different.”³

The attitude towards the unification processes and the negotiations is also influenced by the level of information provided to the public. Sound information obtained about the negotiations encourages support both for a positive evaluation of the government as well as for the Union.

4. Social differentiation of opinions.

The attitudes held by various social groups towards integration with the European Union may be described in the following way:

1. People who approve of the integration process and optimists are predominantly young people, persons holding managerial positions, educated people, but quite often also the unemployed and unskilled workers.
2. Particularly pessimistic attitudes may be observed among farmers and farm workers, as well as among the supporters of the PSL peasant party and the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP).
3. The respondents’ level of income and place of residence have little influence over the differentiation of opinions.

³ Jacek Kucharczyk, *“For and Even Against:” Political Parties In the 1997 Elections Towards European Integration Prospects*, the Public Affairs Institute, published as part of the series: Reports, Warsaw 1997.

4. The greatest fears concerning the consequences of integration have been voiced by farmers and the trade sector, whereas the EU membership is the most strongly sought by the public sector. The attitudes of the private sector are ambiguous: approval for integration is accompanied by fears concerning the weakness of the Polish economy.
5. The unemployed declare a surprisingly strong support for the integration process. This group, as well as young people, view integration as an opportunity to fulfil their aspirations and interests.

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